

Veterinary Services response to a natural disaster; 2016 Central Italy earthquake

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The Istituto Zooprofilattico Sperimentale dell'Abruzzo e del Molise "G. Caporale" (IZSAM) is a public health body belonging to the Italian National Health System, which has operated as an OIE Collaborating Centre on Veterinary Training, Epidemiology, Food safety and Animal Welfare since 2004. In 2013, IZSAM was also appointed as the National Reference Centre for Urban Hygiene and Non-Epidemic Emergencies (IUVENE), partly as a result of its role in coordinating and managing the veterinary emergency activities during the 2009 L'Aquila earthquake - a disaster that sadly resulted in the loss of 308 lives, and which brought havoc to an extensive area of the Abruzzo region.

On 24th August this year, another earthquake, this time measuring 6.0 on the Richter scale, struck an even larger area, including four Apennine regions of central Italy, and resulting in the deaths of a further 300 people. In its aftermath, the need for reinforced, effective coordination and communication became apparent once more, particularly given the numerous organizations that were involved with the relief efforts. Moreover, the effectiveness of the National Civil Protection (NCP) response was potentially hindered due to the lack of operational procedure between key agencies.

Therefore, following the first phase of the relief efforts, which were dedicated to the search and rescue of people, an Interregional Technical Committee (CTI) was established under the NCP's Health-social-veterinary assistance function, and IUVENE was included as a permanent member.

IUVENE immediately made operational and informative tools available, which were quickly utilized in order to identify the main needs, to prioritize and plan specific veterinary interventions in the areas of animal health, welfare, and food safety. A tailor made information system was updated and adapted to the situation, in order to guarantee coherent and harmonized data collection concerning the needs of livestock and farmers, in addition to those for food establishments and feed industries.

A Help Desk was activated, advertised and managed by IUVENE, enabling citizens to flag any need for veterinary interventions in the affected area. These requests were promptly forwarded to the personnel operating in the field, and the system allowed the users to upload and save information on their activities, and to monitor and verify the effectiveness.

In addition, an IUVENE multidisciplinary unit conducted a census of companion animals, which followed owners who have been temporarily displaced, in order to capture a holistic picture of the situation. This action was also intended to protect the integrity of the human – animal bond, both as a factor of relief and of social comfort in what was a critical time for the affected community.

Key words: animal health and welfare - emergency management - food safety - natural disasters